A new race of the Scaly Babbler *Turdoides squamulatus* from Somalia

by J. S. Ash

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A babbler *Turdoides* sp. living in riverine scrub along the Webi (River) Shebelli in southern Somalia is very similar to other babblers seen upstream further to the north in Ethiopia. My identification of these birds in the field was uncertain, but the collection of specimens has shown that they belong to a distinct new subspecies of the Scaly Babbler *Turdoides squamulatus* (Fig. 1).

I propose to name this distinctive race:

Turdoides squamulatus carolinae subsp. nov.

Diagnosis: a white-headed race except for darker crown and nape.

Type: full-grown, collected at 7 km northeast of Afgoi (at 02° 11'N, 45° 10'E), southern Somalia, 11 December 1978, by J. S. Ash, collector's number 214, USNM 571274.

Measurement of type: wing 105, tail 100, bill from skull 22 mm.

Distribution: riverine scrub at low altitude along the Webi Shebelli from Afgoi to Jiohar in Somalia and from Callafo to Imi in Ethiopia and probably along the intervening stretch of river.

This bird is named for my daughter who saw it with me in Ethiopia and Somalia and drew the accompanying illustration from my specimens.

In 1971 I travelled along the Webi Shebelli with my wife and daughter, from 05° 25'N, 44° 30'E near Mustahil, to Imi, and found this babbler at Callafo, at Imi and at a point between the 2 localities (see Appendix). At the time they were tentatively identified as White-headed Babblers *Turdoides leucocephala* because of the absence of pale rumps and their largely white heads. We did not know then that this area was far outside the range of distribution of this species. Unfortunately a captured bird was not collected, and the colour film on which it was photographed was lost in the post. However, I failed to see any sign of the species on further visits to the area in April 1974 and October/November 1975; but further south in Somalia similar babblers were found in the Afgoi-Jiohar area on the Shebelli, and specimens were collected (Table 1).

Table 1

Details of *Turdoides squamulatus* collected in Somalia (in mm and g)

Ref.	Subspecies	Locality	Date	Sex	Wing	Weight
a	*T.s.jubaensis*	Gelib, Juba	12.x.78	♀	100	—
b	*T.s.jubaensis*	Gelib, Juba	12.x.78	o	98	—
c	*T.s.jubaensis*	Fanole, Juba	4.v.79	♀	96	—
d	*T.s.jubaensis*	Fanole, Juba	4.v.79	♂	102	—
e	*T.s.carolinae*	Afgoi, Shebelli	11.xii.78	♀	105	—
f	*T.s.carolinae*	Afgoi, Shebelli	3.ii.79	o	100	65.0
*g**	*T.s carolinae*	Callafo, Shebelli	13.ix.71	o	106	62.1
h	*T.s.squamulatus*	40km S of Kolbio	24.ix.79	♀	101	83.4

*not collected o = Unsexed

Turdoides squamulatus is one of a group of 12 species of Afrotropical babblers which have been divided into 2 distinct superspecies by Hall & Moreau (1970). These authors show that although they now have a continuous distribution, this must once have been very disrupted for so much speciation to have developed. The species *T. squamulatus* is distinguished from other species in the genus by a combination of characters which

TABLE 2

Differences in head pattern between *Turdoides squamulatus jubaensis* (*a* in Table 1) and *T.s. carolinae* (*e* in Table 1).

	jubaensis	*carolinae*
Forehead	Blackish-grey with narrow ashy fringes	White
Crown	Blackish-grey with narrow pale brown fringes	Black with broad ashy fringes, interspersed with all white feathers
Nape	Greyish brown with faint paler fringes	Similar, but admixed with all white feathers
Lores and ear coverts	Blackish grey	White
Above eyes	As crown	White
Sides of face	As ear coverts	White
Chin	White	White
Sides of neck	Greyish brown with narrow white fringes	White, admixed with a few feathers with brownish grey centres

Fig. 1. Heads of *Turdoides squamulatus*. From top to bottom: *T. s. carolinae; T. s. jubaensis; T. s. squamulatus.*

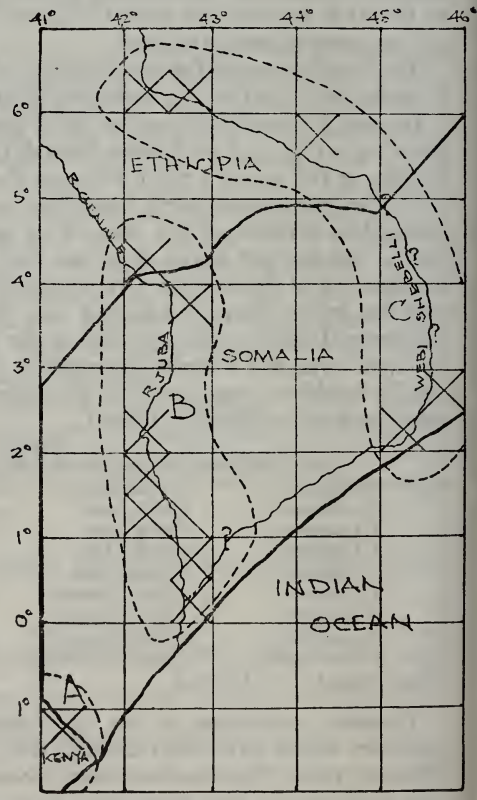

Fig. 2. Distribution of the three subspecies of *Turdoides squamulatus* in Somalia and Ethiopia. A = *squamulatus*; B = *jubaensis*; C = *carolinae*.

includes: absence both of clear white head (although this may not apply to the northern population of *carolinae*) and of white rump, presence of pale brown underwing coverts and a yellow eye. The nominate race is restricted to a very small range in dense coastal bush in Kenya from Lamu to Vanga (White 1962), extending up the Tana River to above Garsen (Britton 1980). It almost certainly occurs along the coast north of Lamu, for it is known now from southern Somalia (see Appendix).

Isolated from the nominate race, to the north is *T. s. jubaensis,* distributed along the Juba River from Dolo to Mareri (see Appendix). This race is lighter and greyer above and has less dusky ear coverts. The details for my specimens from Somalia, and for the one handled in Ethiopia are given in Table 1. In the fresh skins examined the two May *jubaensis* (*c* and *d*) are very similar to the two October birds (*a* and *b*) collected only a few kilometres apart along the Juba, except that the whole of their upperparts below the head, including wings and tail is browner, brownish-olive as opposed to greyish-olive, although *b* is slightly browner than *a*. Similarly, on the upperparts, all feathers showing greyish colouration in *a* and *b* are browner in *c* and *d*. The most striking difference between *carolinae* from the Shebelli and *jubaensis* is the amount of white on the head. The December Afgoi bird (*e*) has upperparts much the same colour as the October *T.s.jubaensis* from Gelib, but the February bird (*f*) is slightly browner than *e*. The same comments apply to the underparts, except that the Afgoi birds are slightly paler grey, and the brownish wash on the flanks is less extensive and somewhat greyer. However, it is in the head region that they differ mostly (Fig. 1 and Table 2).

The second Afgoi bird (*f*) is essentially similar except that the forehead has one or two feathers, and the crown has more feathers, with black centres, and their pale fringes are narrower. As stated above, no specimens nor description exist for birds from Ethiopia, but my impression is that the latter were even whiter in the head region, so much so that they were thought to be *T. leucocephala*. *T.s.squamulatus,* which just reaches southern Somalia (Fig. 2), is a darker bird, without a white throat patch and with a blackish crown and ear coverts.

A pair of *carolinae* was seen with nesting material on 20 October; the ♀ *squamulatus* had slightly advanced gonads (largest ovum 1.5 mm) on 24 September.

In the field, *carolinae* is mainly silent and unobtrusive, although occasionally a party call together loudly in typical babbler fashion and sometimes emerge from thick cover into the open. The Afgoi *carolinae* show a great deal of white on the head, unlike *jubaensis* whose heads, except for a white throat, look all dark (an exception was a bird on 2 October 1979 at Shongolo, which possessed several white feathers in the head region and therefore approached *carolinae*). *squamulatus* is darker still and any whiteness is reduced to a scaly pattern (Fig. 1). The absence of a white rump, in connection with a bright yellow eye, rules out any race of the White-rumped Babbler *T.leucopygius*.

In Ethiopia and Somalia no other species of *Turdoides* babbler occurs alongside *T.squamulatus,* but not far away to the west in the upper reaches of the Webi Gestro (06° 59′N, 40° 44′E) near Ghinnir, there is another species with uniform brown upperparts, brownish white underparts, pale (?yellowish brown) underwing coverts and a red eye, which needs to be collected and named.

T. squamulatus therefore occurs in 3 races through eastern Kenya, southern

Somalia and southeastern Ethiopia (Fig. 2), showing a discontinuous cline of decreasing white-headedness from north to south, thus paralleling the situation of *T.leucopygius* in Ethiopia. Probably the most northerly *T. squamulatus,* in Ethiopia, which have even whiter heads, are isolated from those in Somalia, and may in due course require taxonomic separation. Along both the Shebelli and Juba rivers their riverine habitat is being destroyed at an alarming rate, and both races are inevitably threatened.

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APPENDIX

Records of the 3 races of Scaly Babbler *Turdoides squamulatus* in Ethiopia and Somalia.

Locality	Coordinates		Date	Number	Observers
T.s.squamulatus					
*c.*30km S of Kolbio	01°22′S,	41°23′E	19.ix.79	1p	Ash & Miskell
40km S of Kolbio	01°28′S,	41°27′E	24.ix.79	1p(1 coll.)	Ash & Miskell
T.s.jubaensis					
Serenli	02°23′N,	42°18′E			Van Someren 1929**
Hellesheid	00°38′N,	42°45′E			Van Someren 1929
Lugh	03°48′N,	42°32′E			Van Someren 1932
Dawa River	04°10′N,	42°06′E	29.iv.01	♂	Erlanger 1905
Dolo	04°10′N,	42°06′E	30,iv.01	2♂,1♀	Erlanger 1905
Salakle	01°50′N,	42°17′E	6.vi.01	♂	Erlanger 1905
Solole	*c.*01°25′N,	42°25′E	11-14.vi.01	2♂,1♀	Erlanger 1905
Bua	*c.*00°31′N,	42°47′E	28.vi.01	2♂,10	Erlanger 1905
Dolo	04°10′N,	42°06′E	16.iv.11	1	Salvadori 1912
Serenli	02°23′N,	42°18′E			Van Someren 1931
Mareri	00°25′N,	42°43′E	1979	?	Haslam 1980
Shongolo	00°47′N,	42°38′E	11.x.78	2p	Ash
Gelib	00°29′N,	42°47′E	11.x.78	1p	Ash
Mareri	00°25′N,	42°43′E	29.ix.79	3p	Ash & Miskell
Shongolo	00°47′N,	42°38′E	2.x.79	VC	Ash & Miskell
Gola	01°24′N,	42°27′E	3.x.79	Sev.pp.	Ash & Miskell
Mansur	02°12′N,	42°15′E	4.x.79	1p	Ash & Miskell
(Far Sarei	01°01′N,	43°22′E	20.ii.80	2p	Ash & Miskell)*
Shongolo	00°47′N,	42°38′E	24.ii.80	2p	Ash & Miskell
Shonde	01°03′N,	42°35′E	26.ii.80	4p	Ash & Miskell
Fanole	00°28′N,	42°47′E	4.v.79	1♂,1♀	Y. A. Jimale
T.s.carolinae					
Callafo	05°36′N,	44°13′E	13.ix.71	2p(10+)	Ash
Gode(117km W)	06°18′N,	42°35′E	16.ix.71	3	Ash
Imi	06°28′N,	42°10′E	17.ix.71	3	Ash
Near Afgoi	02°11′N,	45°10′E	1978–1980	Often	Ash & Miskell
Balad	02°23′N,	45°24′E	21.xii.78	1p	Ash
Balad	02°23′N,	45°24′E	23.xii.79	3+	Ash
Jiohar	02°47′N,	45°31′E	30.i.80	6	Ash

Note. p = party; pp = parties; * = heard only; VC = very common; o = sex unknown.

**The data in Van Someren's papers are rather confusing; according to the card index of his specimans in the possession of his son, Dr. G. R. Cunningham-van Someren, there were 7 specimens. These came from Hellesheid, Serenli and between Lugh and Serenli, in July 1922 and February 1923.

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BOOKS RECEIVED

Jennings, M. C. 1981. *The Birds of Saudi Arabia: a Check-list*. Pp. 1-112. The author, 10 Mill Lane, Whittlesford, Cambridge, England. £6.30, post-free (£7.30 air mail).

This is the first time that an attempt has been made to define the status and range of the 410-odd species recorded within the Kingdom. The breeding avifauna (some 150 species) of Saudi Arabia belong predominantly with the Palaearctic Region but Afrotropical and Oriental elements are also represented. In addition, there are over 200 species which occur only as passage migrants. There are 4 maps: the first illustrates 7 suggested ornithological sub-divisions (referred to as "regions") of Saudi Arabia; the 3 others show respectively localities mentioned in the text, mean annual rainfall and relief. Also worth mentioning are attractive line drawings by Dr. C. J. F. Coombs of the Quail and 3 species of bustard, and distribution maps of 117 of the breeding species. This work will be essential to any ornithologist resident in or visiting Saudi Arabia and doubtless useful to any student of the Arabian peninsula. The author is to be commended for his enterprise in sponsoring publication himself.

Oberlé, Philippe (Ed). 1981. *Madagascar. Un Sanctuaire de la Nature*. Pp. 118, 103 illustrations in colour, 13 in black-and-white, 4 maps. Lechevalier S.A.R.L., 19 rue Aûgereau, Paris 7e. Fr. 145 (including postage).

Contains 8 chapters by well known specialists, the first by Recteur Paulian, and concludes with a useful bibliography. Many of the illustrations are outstanding and for these alone this volume should excite general interest in the cause of conservation in Madagascar, which, indeed, is a problem of outstanding importance in view of the remarkable degree of endemism there. The chapter on birds by C. W. Benson alone covers 4 endemic families, while the endemic genus *Coua* (in the Cuculidae), for example, has radiated into 10 species. In the list of species Benson was obliged to follow the nomenclature in the book by Milon *et al.* (1973) on the birds of Madagascar: hence *Apus apus balstoni* instead of *A. barbatus balstoni* and *Pseudocossyphus imerinus* instead of *Monticola sharpei* are used. Altogether a most commendable publication.

Gotch, A. F. 1981. *Birds—Their Latin Names Explained*. Pp. 1-348. Blandford Press: Poole, Dorset. £10.95.

An elementary introduction to the nomenclature of birds (following the author's similar publication for mammals). The first 40 pages explain the rudiments of classification, while the rest of the book gives the derivations of the scientific names of some 1850 species, chosen arbitrarily apparently as a cross-section of the world's 8600-odd species. The syllables of each generic name are usually straightforwardly translated, the